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# Public Attitudes and Behaviors with Respect to Child Abuse Prevention 1987–1991

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# Public Attitudes and Behaviors With Respect to Child Abuse Prevention

The past twenty years have seen an explosion of efforts to prevent child abuse. Respite care centers, telephone crisis counseling, parenting education services, home visiting services and child assault prevention education programs are now commonplace in local communities across the country. Further, it has been argued that these efforts are key to reducing certain forms of abusive behavior toward children and in creating a more positive climate for supporting children.

Effectively preventing child abuse, however, goes beyond the establishment of specific services. Equally important is the need to create greater public support for and involvement in prevention efforts and to foster more positive interactions between parents and their children. To this end, the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA) began commissioning national public opinion polls in 1986 to determine the public's attitudes and actions with respect to child abuse prevention. Each survey involves a representative telephone survey of 1,250 randomly selected adults across the country. The first survey, in December, 1986, was conducted by Louis Harris and the subsequent surveys by Schulman, Ronca and Bucuvalas of New York City. The purpose of this document is to summarize the key findings of these efforts and their implications for child abuse prevention programs and policy.

## METHODOLOGY

The sample for each study is a national modified random-digit-dial telephone survey. Because random-digit-dial samples

substitute random digits for the last three numbers in each core telephone number, they represent both listed and unlisted telephone households. The sample, using 200 sample points, is stratified by region and type of place.

Within each household contacted, respondents are randomly selected on the "last birthday" method. Interviewers are required to interview the adult in the household who had celebrated his/her birthday most recently, as opposed to the person who picked up the telephone. Up to four calls are made to households where there was no answer, busy or where the designated respondent was not available on previous calls. Each year approximately 36 to 38% of the respondents are parents with children under 18 living at home.

As with all samples, this sample is subject to sampling error. Sampling error is the difference between the results obtained by the sample and those which would have been obtained by surveying the entire population. The sampling error for the entire sample is plus or minus 3 percentage points, assuming a 95% confidence level. Consequently, differences greater than 3% in response patterns to the same question across years suggest a statistically significant change in attitudes or behaviors. However, in those instances where only a portion of the sample is analyzed (e.g. questions pertaining to parenting practices), the sampling error increases to plus or minus 5 percentage points, with greater variation in response patterns required for significant differences.

The specific questions utilized in the study were jointly developed by the survey team and NCPCA staff. Dr. Richard Gelles of the University of Rhode Island has assisted in the development

of all five surveys. All of the surveys probe the public's perception of the impact certain behaviors have on children and the role they see for themselves in preventing child abuse. In the most recent survey, respondents also were asked to rank the impact of various factors on child abuse rates.

In addition to the survey's substantive questions, various description questions are asked for purposes of classifying respondents. These questions include the respondent's age, race, sex, income, occupation, geographic location, educational status and political preference.

This report summarizes the findings relative to four areas: public attitudes toward specific parental discipline practices; the frequency of specific parental discipline practices; the public's support for and involvement in child abuse prevention efforts; and the public's perception of the causes of maltreatment.

## THE FINDINGS

### Attitudes Toward Parenting Behaviors

For the fifth consecutive year, the vast majority of the public viewed physical punishment and repeated yelling and swearing as detrimental to a child's well-being. As indicated in Table 1, only 18% of the public feels the use of physical punishment never leads to injury and only 5% believes repeated yelling and swearing never leads to long-term emotional harm. Since the initiation of the survey, however, the public has shifted in terms of how severe it views the consequences of physical punishment. On balance, a more moderate position on this issue has emerged over time, with fewer respondents viewing physical punishment as both "very often"

Table 1

Public Attitudes Toward Parental Behaviors:
Results by Percent

| | 1991 | 1990 | 1989 | 1988 | 1987 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How often do you think physical punishment of a child leads to injury to the child? | | | | | |
| Very Often/Often | 31 | 35 | 36 | 33 | 40 |
| Occasionally | 44 | 37 | 35 | 38 | 31 |
| Hardly Ever/Never | 18 | 19 | 21 | 23 | 24 |
| Not Sure | 7 | 9 | 8 | 6 | 5 |
| "How often do you think repeated yelling and swearing leads to long-term emotional problems for the child?" | | | | | |
| Very Often/Often | 75 | 76 | 73 | 72 | 73 |
| Occasionally | [illegible] | 15 | 18 | 18 | 17 |
| Hardly Ever/Never | [illegible] | 6 | 6 | 8 | 7 |
| Not Sure | [illegible] | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 |

N = 1,250

and "never" resulting in injury. While 31% of the public reported in 1987 that this behavior occasionally harmed a child, 44% of the public voiced this opinion in 1991.

While women and those in the western part of the country are more likely than others to express concern with both of these discipline practices, an examination of responses by specific demographic characteristics reveals that different subpopulations are concerned about physical punishment versus repeated yelling and swearing. On balance, concern over physical punishment is particularly strong among those who are young (i.e. 18 to 24), Black, and non-high school graduates. Strongest concern over emotional maltreatment is found among those 25 to 34 years of age, Hispanics, professionals and college graduates.

Parenting Practices

In the most recent survey, 56% of the parents interviewed reported never insulting or swearing at their children in the past year as a means of discipline and 48% reported never spanking their children in the past year. As illustrated in Table 2, these response patterns differ significantly from those reported in 1988. Compared to the initial survey year, the most recent statistics represent an 11% decrease in the number of parents yelling or swearing at their children and a 12% decrease in the number of parents relying on spanking as a method of discipline. While the 1991 figures are slightly less favorable than those reported in 1990, these changes are not significant and may be accounted for by sampling error.

Table 2

Parental Discipline Practices:
Results by Percent

| | 1991 | | 1990 | | 1989 | | 1988 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (O)a | (N)b | (O)a | (N)b | (O)a | (N)b | (O)a | (N)b |
| Denying Privileges | 16 | 24 | 9 | 26 | 15 | 24 | 6 | 25 |
| Confine in a room | 9 | 43 | 7 | 48 | 8 | 42 | 4 | 46 |
| Insulted/Swore | 6 | 56 | 3 | 60 | 5 | 49 | 2 | 45 |
| Spanked/hit | 7 | 48 | 5 | 49 | 8 | 39 | 4 | 36 |
| N = | (480) | | (459) | | (513) | | (490) | |

a. "O" refers to often (at least once a month).
b. "N" refers to never.

In addition to these questions, the most recent survey also asked parents the frequency in the last 12 months in which they kicked, bit or punched their child; hit or tried to hit their child; and, if they did hit their child, how often they bruised their child. Ninety-seven percent of the parents surveyed report they never kicked, bit or punched their child in the past 12 months and 92% of the parents report never attempting to hit their child. Those who did indicate hitting their child with an object most frequently report using a belt or a strap. Of those who hit their child in the past year, 1% report that this behavior bruised the child and an additional 6% are unsure if bruising occurred.

As with the previous question, various demographic factors distinguished among parents using these various discipline methods. Denying privileges is more commonly found among individuals who are white, have higher income and have a post-college education. The use of spanking is most common among Blacks, those with moderate to low incomes and those living in the South. The most serious forms of physical punishment (e.g. kicked, bit or punched or bruising a child) are found among older respondents (i.e. those 35 to 54 years of age) and those with incomes less than $15,000 and those with incomes over $50,000. Contrary to common belief, this last finding indicates that violence between parents and children is not limited to a single economic group. While fewer parents with higher incomes report the use of physical punishment, those who do hit their children appear to use these more serious forms of physical punishment.

Commitment to Preventing Child Abuse

For the past four years, a steady decline has been noted in the faith both parents and the public have in their abilities to prevent child abuse. While far more continue to feel that they can do something to prevent maltreatment than feel they can do nothing, respondents, particularly parents, are more pessimistic, as illustrated in Tables 3 and 4. Among those subpopulations expressing the greatest belief in their ability to prevent child abuse are individuals 25-34 years of age, Blacks and Hispanics, those living in the western United States, and those earning less than $7,500 annually.

Respondents also were asked if they had done anything in the past year to prevent child abuse. Given the increased pessimism noted above, one might have expected a decline in individual actions to prevent child abuse. However, as indicated in Table 6, a significant increase was noted in the number of parents reporting that they took personal action to prevent child abuse. While the percentage of the general public actively preventing child abuse did not show a significant increase, the number is the highest noted over the five-year reporting period. Those most likely to act to prevent child abuse include parents, women, Hispanics, those with incomes over $25,000 annually, those living in the west and those with a post-graduate education.

Public Perception On the Causes of Child Abuse

An attempt was made in the most recent survey to obtain some estimate of the degree to which the public perceive certain situations as contributing to elevated levels of maltreatment.

Table 3

"How much do you think you can do to prevent child abuse?"
Results by Percent for the General Public

| | 1991 | 1990 | 1989 | 1988 | 1987 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A lot/Some | 57 | 58 | 63 | 66 | 66 |
| Only a Little | 28 | 27 | 22 | 24 | 24 |
| Nothing | 11 | 10 | 10 | 8 | 8 |

N = 1,250

Table 4

"How much do you think you can do to prevent child abuse?"
Results by Percent for Parents

| | 1991 | 1990 | 1989 | 1988 | 1987 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A lot/Some | 68 | 68 | 77 | 80 | 76 |
| Only a Little | 24 | 22 | 18 | 14 | 19 |
| Nothing | 6 | 6 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| N = | (480) | (459) | (513) | (490) | (500) |

Table 5

"Have you done anything personally to prevent child abuse in the past year?"
Results in Percent for the General Pubic

| | 1991 | 1990 | 1989 | 1988 | 1987 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 27 | 23 | 25 | 25 | 23 |
| No | 71 | 74 | 73 | 74 | 77 |

N = 1,250

Table 6

"Have you done anything personally to prevent child abuse in the past year?"
Results in Percent for Parents

| | 1991 | 1990 | 1989 | 1988 | 1987 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 37 | 32 | 39 | 35 | 32 |
| No | 60 | 64 | 59 | 63 | 68 |
| N = | (480) | (459) | (513) | (490) | (500) |

Table 7 shows the percent of the general public who view each item as contributing a "great deal" to abuse levels. There are virtually no differences in the response of parents and non-parents to these questions. However, the level of concern with each of the items varied rather dramatically across other subpopulations.

In terms of age, the youngest respondents voice greater concern than others with the issues of teachers hitting students, parents hitting children, the use of the death penalty and racism. In contrast, those respondents 55 years of age or older are most concerned with violence on television, violence in the movies, rock music, toy guns and poverty. Women are disproportionately concerned with teachers hitting students, parents hitting children, spouse abuse, violence on television, rock music and violence in the movies. Minorities, particularly Blacks, are disproportionately concerned with spouse abuse, violence on television, violence in the movies, toy guns, racism, poverty and contact sports. Interestingly, the only subpopulation expressing an above average level of concern over contact sports are Blacks. While only 4% of the total sample identify contact sports as contributing a great deal to child abuse rates, 11% of Black respondents express this opinion.

Differences also were noted according to income and educational levels. On balance, those with lower incomes and the least education voice greater concern over teachers hitting students, the use of the death penalty, all forms of media violence, toy guns, and sexism. Those with higher incomes and at least a college education give greater weight to spouse abuse,

Table 7

Public Perception of the Causes of Child Abuse:
Results Given in Percent

| ITEM | PERCENT SEEING ITEM CONTRIBUTING "A GREAT DEAL" TO ABUSE |
|---|---|
| Violence Between Husbands and Wives | 58 |
| Poverty | 45 |
| Violence on Television | 28 |
| Violence in Movies | 25 |
| Racial Discrimination/Racism | 24 |
| Heavy Metal Rock Music | 20 |
| Parents Spanking/Hitting Their Children | 19 |
| Sex Discrimination | 14 |
| Teachers Hitting/Spanking Children In Schools | 12 |
| Toy Guns and War Toys | 11 |
| Use of the Death Penalty for Murder | 8 |
| Contact Sports (Boxing, Hockey, Wrestling and Football) | 4 |

racism and poverty in explaining child abuse rates. The one issue which does not fit this pattern is the way respondents view parents hitting children. In this case, those in the lowest income categories and those with at least a college education tend to view this factor as contributing a great deal to child abuse while those with higher incomes and less education place less emphasis on this factor.

Regional differences also were noted in the sample. Those respondents living in the east ascribe greater value than those living in other areas of the country to teachers hitting students, parents hitting children and poverty in explaining child abuse. In contrast, those living in the west place greater concern than others on racism and sexism in contributing to child abuse rates.

Finally, political preference also distinguish the issues given greater importance in contributing to child abuse. While those who identify themselves as liberals place greater emphasis on parents hitting children, racism and sexism, those identifying themselves as conservative place greater emphasis on rock music and violence in the movies.

IMPLICATIONS

These data suggest a dramatic change in public attitudes and behaviors over the past several years with respect to several issues key to creating an environment conducive to preventing child abuse. Three out of every four Americans believe that repeated yelling and swearing and the use of physical punishment can injure a child. Perhaps most encouraging is the steady increase in the number of parents who have acted on this belief and no longer use

insulting, swearing or spanking as discipline methods. Compared to 1988, 11% fewer parents are yelling and swearing at their children annually and 12% fewer are spanking their children. Beyond specific parenting practices, a larger number of individuals, particularly those who are parents, are acting each year to prevent child abuse. Last year, one out of every four individuals, and one out of every three parents, took personal responsibility for reducing the incidence of maltreatment. Their actions include stopping a parent from lashing out at his or her child, offering assistance to a parent under stress and providing financial support to an organization working to prevent child abuse. On balance, child abuse policy and program planners should be encouraged by these findings.

The data also suggest a number of challenges. While there has been a significant change in individual parenting practices, the use of physical punishment both in home and in schools remains widespread. At present, over 50% of the states continue to allow the use of corporal punishment in the classroom. Further, the majority of the public does not make an explicit link between spanking and child abuse. When asked the relationship between hitting and child abuse, only 19% of the respondents said such behaviors by parents contribute a "great deal" to child abuse rates and only 12% of the respondents said such behaviors by teachers contribute a "great deal" to child abuse. In our society, parents enjoy great latitude in how they choose to discipline their children. Formal, public intervention into the parent-child relationship is limited to those instances in which a child is

harmed or is at risk of serious injury. Protecting a family's right to privacy, however, is not at odds with educating parents on alternatives to corporal punishment.

While more individuals are acting to prevent child abuse, they have decreasing faith in the efficacy of their efforts. Compared to prior years, over 10% fewer individuals feel that can do a lot or some to prevent child abuse. In a sense, this growing pessimism reflects a keener appreciation for the complexity of the issue. The causes of abuse are multi-dimensional, resting both in the nature of the individual and the nature of society. Public understanding of this fact is reflected in the types of issues respondents most frequently list as contributing a "great deal" to child abuse. Violence between husbands and wives, poverty, violence in the media and racism were all noted by at least one quarter of the respondents as major contributors to maltreatment. Sustaining the commitment and involvement of the public in child abuse prevention may well require increased attention to these and similar social phenomena on the part of those shaping child abuse prevention programs and policies.

The progress that has been made in prevention is uneven. On virtually every question examined in the public opinion poll responses differed by the participant's age, race, sex, income, educational background, occupation, political preference and geographic location. These patterns suggest the need for a diversified prevention message. While some individuals will continue to need general public education on the issue, others will be receptive to more complex messages and will be willing to take

an active role in preventing child abuse. The different parenting practices and family relationships found across various racial and cultural groups further support the need for specialized prevention efforts. Variation is needed not only in the content of the message but also in the method of delivery. While some individuals will respond to public service announcements and impersonal interventions, others will need personal and extended contact to influence their behaviors. Further expanding the public's commitment to and involvement in prevention will require increased attention to the public's diverse knowledge and skills.